From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

# The Demiurge in North American Mythology

**by**

**Frithjof Schuon**

*This essay first appeared in the French journal* Études Traditionnelles *(janvier-février, 1967), and in translation in the journal* Tomorrow *(Autumn, 1966). It has appeared in English as a chapter in the books* Logic and Transcendence *(Harper & Row, 1975; Perennial Books, 1984; World Wisdom, 2009), and* The Feathered Sun *(World Wisdom, 1990). The essay below includes explanatory notes by editor James S. Cutsinger to World Wisdom's 2009 new edition of* Logic and Transcendence. *© World Wisdom, Inc.*

In all the variants of North American mythology there appears a sort of demiurge below the Supreme Spirit or Great Mystery, who is both beneficent and terrible and who functions as both an initiatic hero and a buffoon—even a demon. We find the same characteristics in Hermes, Hercules, Prometheus, Epimetheus, and Pandora, and in Nordic mythology in Loki—half-god and half-giant, at once the enemy and friend of the other divinities—as well as in the terrible Susano-wo-no-Mikoto of the Japanese pantheon, who is spirit of the tempest and in some ways the *princeps huius mundi*. There seems to be no mythology from which the jesting or mischievous demigod is wholly absent, but it is perhaps in the mythology of the North American Indians that this figure has attracted the most attention on the part of ethnologists and missionaries; indeed Nanabozho or Minabozho of the Algonquins has come to be regarded as a typical example of the kind of divinity in question.

Our aim is not to go into details, but to state the principle and explain its essential meaning; it is therefore sufficient to begin by saying that the demiurge, who is also the founding hero—hence the inventor or discoverer, and thus the initiator—of a given material and spiritual civilization, appears in the form of an animal or a man, or of some mysterious and indeterminate creature.[1] His myth is a series of acts or adventures—often grotesque and unintelligible—that

[1] The demiurge often appears as the "Great Hare"; for the Sioux he is the "Spider"—a dethroned god, like Susano in Shinto—while for the Blackfoot he is the "Old Man", who becomes "Old Man Coyote" for the Crow. In Iroquois mythology the beneficent demiurge Teharonhiawagon has a twin brother, Tawiskaron, who incarnates the tenebrous aspect; Tawiskaron always tries to imitate Teharonhiawagon but ends up

constitute so many symbolical teachings, sometimes of an esoteric significance. The demiurge may appear as a sort of emanation from the creator; he has been described as the life embodied in all beings, and he therefore assumes all their possibilities, struggles, destinies. There is something protean, chaotic, and absurd about him, and in him the divine is combined with the tenebrous; a desire for dissimulation and "occultation" has been attributed to him, and in this respect he appears like a wise actor deliberately playing the fool;[2] his acts are incomprehensible, like the *kōan*s of Zen. It must be remembered that the bizarre and even shocking often act as a protective veil for the sacred, and this is why there are dissonances in the revealed Scriptures and also—on a more outward level—why there are grimacing monsters on the doors of sanctuaries.

In order to penetrate the enigma of the demiurge-buffoon and get to its very root, one must turn first to the Vedantic notion of *Māyā* and second to the idea of the sacrifice of Purusha. *Māyā* comprises three *guna*s, three cosmic qualities or tendencies: the ascending (*sattva*), the spreading or expansive (*rajas*), and the descending (*tamas*); now the demiurge is identified first with primordial chaos and then becomes the prototype of all things, both good and evil; the diversity and inequality of earthly creatures—ranging from the sublime to the nightmarish—attest to this fact. As for Purusha, his fragmented body—in passing from the celestial Substance to a sort of universal coagulation—has become the sum of all creatures, the good as well as the bad, for some parts of his body pertain to *sattva*, others to *rajas*, others to *tamas*.

The Semitic religions tend to make a clear distinction between the personification of evil and the Sovereign Good, but the opposite perspective is not entirely absent from the theologies of these religions, for it is said that God "hardened the heart of Pharaoh", and other formulations of the same kind can be found; while one must obviously allow for a metaphysical explanation—though this is not the issue—such expressions nonetheless shock a certain "moral logic". The presence of the serpent in the earthly Paradise is a similar enigma, and so is the pact that seems to exist between God and the devil on the subject of mankind: the devil has the right to seduce men, and God "permits" evil without positively "willing" it. All these difficulties are resolved in light of the doctrine of *Māyā*.

---

being killed by him after a terrible combat. We should note that for the Sioux the presence of Iktomi, the "Spider", does not alter the fact that the demon as such is Iya, the "Cyclone", and that the "cultural hero" (*Kulturheros*) is a feminine divinity of luminous character, namely Pte San Win, the "White Buffalo Woman"; in this mythology, as in certain others of the same type, the demiurgic function is thus incarnated in three or more personifications, depending on whether it is "passional", "tenebrous", or—on the contrary—"luminous". In any case, as long as one remains at the level of simple images, it is impossible to give an account of these shifting forms of symbolism in exhaustive terms or in a systematic manner.

[2] This causes some Indians to say that the creator-initiator "disguises himself" as a crow, a coyote, or a hare.

*  *  *

The key to the doctrine is basically this: by definition Infinitude requires the dimension of the finite; this dimension, while "gloriously" manifesting the inexhaustible possibilities of the divine Self, projects them right up to the limits of nothingness, if one may put it this way; nothingness "is" not, and yet it "appears" in relation to the real, which projects itself in the direction of the finite. To move away from the divine Principle is to become "other than it" while necessarily remaining in it since it is the only Reality; this means that the world necessarily includes the privation of reality or perfection that we refer to as "evil", though in a relative fashion, of course, since nothingness does not exist. On the one hand evil does not come from God, for being negative it cannot have a positive cause; on the other hand evil results from the unfolding of divine manifestation, but in this respect—and this is precisely the point—it is not "evil"; it is simply the shadow of a process that is positive in itself. This is what the myth of the demiurge-buffoon expresses in its fashion.

Finally, if we consider the quality of "obscurity" or "ignorance" (*tamas*) in *Māyā*, insofar as this quality is manifested in nature in general or man in particular, we are compelled to see in it what might be called the "mystery of absurdity": the absurd is whatever lacks a sufficient reason—in itself or as such, not with regard to its metaphysical cause—and manifests no more than its own blind accidentality.[3] The genesis of the world in the first place and then the unfolding of human events appear as a struggle against absurdity; the intelligible is affirmed by contrast with the unintelligible. Without the presence of incomprehensibility—even blind chance—there would be no world and likewise no soul; the soul is a microcosm and obeys the same laws as the universe. Our prototype is Adam, "made in the image of God", but this does not prevent our carrying within ourselves all the absurdity of the Fall, as did this first image of God. In its own way the demiurge of shamanism serves as a reminder of this truth.

*  *  *

The chaotic quality of the Red Indian demiurge—a quality shared by numerous sacred Texts of the first importance—calls for a few remarks on the enigma of prophecies. It is virtually impossible for a prophecy that concerns itself with the development of the whole human cycle—hence with a complex of facts and not just one particular fact—to be entirely accurate and thus to

[3] The crafty and incalculable character of a certain aspect of *Māyā* can also be seen in Sophocles' *Antigone*; in this respect the gods do not differ from the playful and unintelligible semi-divinities of North American shamanism. This is what Hindus call *līlā*, the "divine play"; in its lower modalities, this play exists to be overcome by the sage, and his victory coincides precisely with the upper modalities—which are perfectly intelligible since they are related to *sattva*—of the same eternal and inexhaustible drama. One could say that "everything is absurd except God", recalling that "everything is perishable except the Face of Allah".

complete the future before it actually arrives; what is changed or concealed or even confused in such cases is obviously not the facts insofar as essentials are concerned, but their sequence and proportions.[4] It is as if prophecy were a broken stained-glass window that had been reassembled without regard for the logical placement of the fragments; the message is conveyed, but the form is broken, for "only God knows the hour". What this means is that no complex prophecy can be taken literally, except for the essential facts and the general meaning of the process; God always reserves unforeseeable modalities for Himself, and though He is bound by His word, He nonetheless retains a margin of freedom, the effects of which can be foreseen by no one.[5]

Something similar can be found even in the different religions since, as revelations, they correspond in a certain way to prophecies; their very diversity proves that at the level of appearance—though not in their essential content—they inevitably include an element not unlike the "trickery" of the demiurge; this element does not appear from the point of view of each religion in itself—unless one contrasts exoterism, considered as limitation, with esoterism, which alone is absolutely true—but it does appear from the point of view of the *religio perennis*, which penetrates all revelations and is not imprisoned in any. The sole Revealer—the *Logos*—plays with mutually irreconcilable forms while offering a single content of dazzling self-evidence.

* * *

This allusion to prophecies allows us to point out that there is one kind of absurdity that is merely apparent, and this is the accidental unintelligibility of wisdom, which can be found for example in the Koranic account of the meeting between Moses and al-Khidr:[6] according to the esoteric interpretation of the passage, the apparent absurdity conceals a dimension of depth having no relation to the platitudes of the profane world; in a similar way Saint Paul describes true wisdom as "foolishness" in the eyes of the world. Since "extremes meet", the highest wisdom sometimes adopts the bearing of its opposite; numerous stories of the saints confirm this. From a somewhat different point of view, one might ask what the meaning is of "tricksters" such as Till Eulenspiegel, or Nasreddin Hoja among the Turks; perhaps the role of these pranksters, who are at once popular and classical—as well as the role of the fictional people corresponding

---

[4] Sometimes different events—or personages—merge into one because of their functional identity, or designations of persons and events express only analogies, as well as other ellipses of this kind.

[5] The story of Narasinha, the fourth *Avatāra* of Vishnu, provides an example of this law: Hiranyakashipu, having obtained from Brahma the promise that he would be killed neither by day nor by night and by neither man nor animal, thought he could do as he pleased—until Vishnu intervened in the form of a man with a lion's head, "neither man nor animal", and killed the tyrant at the moment of dusk, "neither night nor day". Shakespeare took this subject or doctrine for his theme in *Macbeth*: the same sequence of prophecy, false assurance, pride, and "divine ruse" in the punishment.

[6] *Sūrah* "The Cave" [18]:65-82.

to them—is to exhaust the possibilities of absurdity contained in earthly *Māyā*, in much the same way as a carnival seeks to neutralize subversive tendencies by deploying all the resources of human imbecility.[7] But there is another very important aspect here, which is related to the function of the court jester, and this is the right to utter or inculcate truths that social convention tends to hide, to make people aware of the stupidity—the "lack of imagination", we might say—that is so typical of conventional life, to pierce its smug opacity with living caricatures that are ceaselessly scathing.[8]

The apparent madness of the Sioux *heyoka*—which belongs to a completely different order, at least intrinsically—raises the question of hidden wisdom or the initiatic concealment of "pearls" before "swine": the *heyoka* were men who, having been honored in a dream by a vision of the "Thunder-Birds", had in this way incurred the obligation to humble themselves and hide their consecration; their case was similar in certain ways to that of the dervishes known as the "people of blame" (*malāmatiyah*), who sought to attract the criticism of the profane and hypocritical while realizing inwardly the most perfect spiritual sincerity.[9] For the sake of humility the *heyoka* condemns himself to perform virtually all actions the wrong way around and to be a man "upside down"—for example, by pretending to shiver when it is hot or to be stifled with heat when it is cold—in order to arouse the mockery of simple or mediocre people; at the same time, however, he is considered the recipient of mysterious powers, and he may come to be deeply respected as someone "apart" and "special", who no longer belongs entirely to this world of pedestrian logic. Moreover—we have already mentioned this—the behavior of the *heyoka* amounts to an initiatic language, comprehensible only to sages, and expresses a sacrificial vocation, that of being "living-dead", in which one is called to re-establish inwardly the bridge between the world of matter and the world of the spirit and immortality.

The Algonquin Nanabozho was no doubt the cosmic originator of good and evil, but he was also the first *heyoka* and the first "fool of God".

---

[7] In the Middle Ages, the feast of fools on New Year's Day led to excesses of buffoonery that verged on sacrilege: a layman dressed up as a bishop gave the benediction and derisively proclaimed indulgences; people ate on the altar and played soldiers' games on it; the pseudo-bishop indulged in all manner of silly behavior. Abuses like this reveal a characteristic lack of equilibrium in the European mentality, which has the tendency to swing from one extreme to the other. It is true that grotesque parodies are meant to exhaust dangerous lower psychic possibilities in a harmless manner, but the very fact that this process is needed, to say nothing of the excesses to which it leads, proves that there is a latent contradiction in the collective soul.

[8] There was something of this in Omar Khayyam, who was a sort of "court jester" of spirituality.

[9] In the Christian world Saint Benedict Labre was one of the most typical cases of this kind. What is involved here is not a spiritual norm, certainly, but a vocation and a very particular function.

## Explanatory Notes by Editor James S. Cutsinger

**From Page 1 above**:

• The Latin phrase *Princeps huius mundi* means "the prince of this world", that is, Satan, and comes from the Vulgate text of John 12:31, 14:30, and 16:11.

**From Page 2 above:**

• "The Lord *hardened the heart of Pharaoh*" (Exod. 9:12; cf. Exod. 10:20, 11:10, 14:8).

**From Page 3 above:**

• Note 3: The ancient Greek playwright *Sophocles* (c. 496-406 B.C.) wrote the tragedy *Antigone* c. 442.

• "*Everything is perishable except the Face of Allah*" (*Sūrah* "The Story" [28]:88).

• "*Made in the image of God*": "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26).

**From Page 4 above:**

• "*Only God knows the hour*": "But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only" (Matt. 24:36; cf. Mark 13:32).

• Note 5: *The story of Narasinha* is recounted in several of the Hindu *Purana*s, including the *Shrīmad Bhāgavatam*, Canto 7.

• Note 5: *Shakespeare took this subject or doctrine for his theme*: "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until/ Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/ Shall come against him. That will never be/ Who can impress the forest, bid the tree/ Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements! good!/ Rebellion's head, rise never till the wood/ Of Birnam rise, and our high-placed Macbeth/ Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath/ To time and mortal custom" (*Macbeth*, Act 4, Scene 1); "The spirits that know/ All mortal consequences have pronounced me thus:/ 'Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman/ Shall e'er have power upon thee.' Then fly, false thanes,/ And mingle with the English epicures:/ The mind I sway by and the heart I bear/ Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear" (*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 3).

• "We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks *foolishness*" (1 Cor. 1:23).

• *Till Eulenspiegel* was a medieval German trickster and fool, whose pranks were designed to expose human vices; *Nasreddin Hoja* is *mutatis mutandis* his Turkish equivalent.

**From Page 5 above:**

• "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your *pearls before swine*, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you" (Matt. 7:6).

• Note 8: Umar al-Khayyam—*Omar Khayyam* (1048-1125)—was a Persian astronomer, mathematician, and poet, whose *Rubāʿiyyāt* (“quatrains”) conceal a mystical apprehension of God under a veil of seeming skepticism and hedonism.

• Note 9: *Benedict* Joseph *Labre* (1748-83), a mendicant Roman Catholic saint, spent much of his life traveling on foot to sites of Christian pilgrimage, begging for his food and sleeping in the open.